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ABSTRACT

Supervisors of alcoholic employees sometimes develop a range of strong feelings similar in nature to those of the employees they wish to help. These strong feelings prevent supervisors from dealing with alcoholic employees in objective, constructive ways. To overcome these barriers supervisors require specialized counseling. A proposed framework for counseling such supervisors takes advantage of the parallel syndrome of feelings and behaviors. This concept utilizes the ready availability of the required skills in the population of alcoholism counselors. It suggests that those to whom supervisors may turn initially, in a quest for a solution to their dilemma, need to examine their ability to provide this counseling. The approach has a high degree of face validity for both counselors and supervisors, and provides suggestions for re-assessing current approaches to supervisory training. (Author)

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A MODEL FOR COUNSELING TROUBLED SUPERVISORS

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In conversations with Federal managers concerning employees with serious alcohol problems one is deeply impressed with the concern and obvious anguish they feel. One is further impressed with the fact that the manager is frequently under stress and shows symptoms of anxiety and frustration. Following such discussions the manager ofter seems greatly relieved and says something like, "Is providing therapy to supervisors part of your job description?"

In many cases that was exactly what was provided. The therapeutic exchange, which often consists primarily of allowing the manager to express his feelings, own them, and accept them as legitimate under the circumstances, can free him to take positive action and to initiate the confrontation that begins the process of referral and rehabilitation. It may be useful to those working in occupational alcoholism programs to consider the ways in which the attitudes and behaviors of supervisors often parallel the attitudes and behaviors of alcoholic employees. It is recognized that this, like most analogies, is not empirically verifiable and, as such, is speculative. Nevertheless, consideration of the parallel nature of the course of the alcoholic's disease and the changing attitudes

and behaviors of the supervisor provides pragmatic suggestions for counseling the supervisor in dealing with his troubled employee and with his own troubled adjustment to the employee.

Considering the troubled supervisor in the same conceptual framework as the alcoholic employee permits the worker in occupational alcoholism to utilize a set of principles and guidelines with which he is familiar and leads to specific interventions to assist the supervisor.

Alcoholic Employees Beget Troubled Supervisors

It is clear that each alcoholic employee begets at least one troubled supervisor. It has not always been recognized that part of the responsibility of those of us in occupational alcoholism is to provide "therapy" to the troubled supervisor. Upon reflection, however, it is obvious that, if the supervisor is to play his role in the rehabilitation process effectively, he must be counseled in how to maintain an objective, consistent approach to the problems of the alcoholic employee and must be helped to understand how the employee's behavior is impacting his own behavior. This is true even though it is recognized that the supervisor's "troubles" are transitory and are situationally determined.

The troubles of alcoholic employees are well documented. The powerful negative feelings, the destructive behaviors and the denial syndrome make up a considerable portion of the literature on alcoholism. In part the illness is defined by a sense of inadequacy, guilt, suppressed anger, confusion, fear, loneliness, preoccupation, and low self-esteem. With this burden it is no wonder that alcoholics suffer an emotional paralysis which inhibits their entry into treatment and their subsequent

recovery. In large part one measure of recovery is the extent to which alcoholics can get in touch with, and become aware of, these feelings.

It is suggested that a similar list of symptoms and similar sets of behavior problems can usefully be ascribed to the concerned supervisor and that a counseling plan for the supervisor based on relieving these symptoms can be effective.

It has been the experience of most occupational alcoholism counselors that supervisors of alcoholic employees become deeply troubled themselves. Many of the same strong feelings paralyzing alcoholics also immobilize supervisors as well. Trice and Roman conceptualize four recognition stages that "significant others" (including supervisors) experience in dealing with alcoholic employees. These are:

1. Disrupted-but-Normal: A period during which intermittent disruption of job performance occurs. Although these behaviors deviate from expectations, they are neither frequent nor disruptive enough to indicate "abnormality".
2. Blocked Awareness: Significant others link the employee's behavior with alcohol use, but recognition of the existence of a "drinking problem" strikes numerous barriers. While deviance may increase in amount and degree, the employee remains "normal" because of these blocks in recognition.
3. See-Saw: As the impairment of job behavior increases, significant others become indecisive about whether to

define the behavior as a deviant-drinking problem or to leave it within the "normal" zone.

4. Decision to recognize: The accumulation of deviance finally tips indecision toward recognizing the behaviors as abnormal. The appropriateness of referral to some treatment facility is recognized.(1)

In the "Blocked Awareness" stage reported by Trice and Roman the supervisor, as a significant other, represses his strong feelings of anger and confusion. This stage is similar to the alcoholic person's denial syndrome, and is essentially identical to the denial process experienced by spouses early in the development of the alcoholism. In the third stage, the See-Saw, these strong feelings can no longer be denied, but are countered by other equally strong feelings of guilt, inadequacy and fear. While pre-occupied with the situation (and devoting an inordinate amount of time to fretting about it), the supervisor is at some point immobilized by the ambivalence fostered by these conflicting feelings. At others he is spurred to irrational behavior and angry outbursts. It is irrational to threaten angrily when you know you have no intention of carrying out the threat.

A supervisor who is seen at this stage needs counseling to provide reassurance that these ambivalent feelings and irrational actions on his part are normal, and even legitimate, adjustive responses to the difficult situation in which the employee has placed him. Then he is ready to hear specific suggestions for dealing with the employee and with the chaotic work-site situation which may have developed.

(1) Spirits and Demons at Work, H.M. Trice and Paul M. Roman Cornell Press, January 1972, page 165

Alcoholic employees have an uncanny knack for manipulating the feelings of supervisors. In many cases they sense the onset of angry outbursts and know how to play for the counter feelings that will serve to blunt supervisory urges to act decisively. A favorite ploy is the "whipped child" syndrome characterized by the "hang dog" look and the "I can't do anything right" verbalizations. Almost invariably these behaviors will tug at parental heartstrings and suddenly supervisors find themselves comforting and supporting alcoholic employees rather than confronting them. At other times outbursts of righteous indignation by employees frighten supervisors and cause them to back off.

Alcoholics have a great deal of experience at playing these games. Without an understanding of what is going on supervisors will not have a chance. It is our job to give supervisors an understanding of the dynamics of these manipulations and to suggest specific techniques for dealing with them in ways which lead to timely and appropriate action. Without objectivity and consistency by the supervisor, situations develop in the manner so vividly portrayed in the supervisory training film "The Dryden File."(2) Matt Cirker, the boss, angrily threatens Tom Dryden over his latest performance problem. In a matter of minutes Dryden "de-fuses" the anger and has Matt engaged in gentle "parental" stroking -- perhaps a bit more rational than his angry outburst but equally non-productive. To make matters worse, Tom isn't the only victim of Matt's anger. Matt's secretary suffers through two angry outbursts. She, like many employees, is defenseless and must endure silently. It becomes clear that this type of behavior affects other employees, fellow supervisors and the overall

(2) "The Dryden File", Newsfilm, U.S.A., New York, N.Y., 1973

productivity and morale of the organization. It also, of course, can reach beyond the work place to affect the families of supervisors.

One final observation on Matt's behavior with Tom. To Matt, his performance was exemplary. He has Tom's pledge to do better. And isn't it much more pleasant filling the role of a nurturing parent than the ulcer and anxiety-provoking role of critical parent? Never mind that both are unproductive. The important thing is that Matt's bad feelings have been miraculously soothed while Tom is free to drink and fail again. The real confrontation has been put off for a while.

Meanwhile, the supervisor knows that he is procrastinating. He recognizes that he is not living up to his responsibilities as a manager. He suspects that other employees in his unit recognize the situation and look down on him for his inability to handle it effectively. And, perhaps worst of all, he may know just barely enough about alcoholism to have a vague underlying fear that he is contributing to the illness of his friend, the alcoholic employee. We must help him sort out these feelings and concerns and must give him practical advice on how to deal with them. One important step in dealing with these feelings is to begin to understand how they came about.

The most important feelings which the supervisor will have (and again, see how closely they parallel those of the alcoholic employee) are:

Anger:

The angry feelings of supervisors toward alcoholic employees are triggered by the broken promises, poor work performance and the absenteeism which requires continual adjustments to schedule. The supervisor may

also feel self directed anger at his inability to change his employee. We become angry at our impotence in the face of situations that we don't understand, such as unpredictable and irrational behavior -- and that's what the alcoholic employee is all about. And nothing seems to work -- at least for long. The supervisor must be helped to understand that his feelings are normal and that positive actions designed to be helpful to the employee will relieve them.

Guilt:

Supervisors feel guilty. The guilt is mirrored in thoughts like:

"What have I done wrong?
Why can't I handle the situation?
It was wrong to lose my temper.
Why didn't I say something?"

The guilt leads to feelings of inadequacy: "I'm a poor supervisor. If I were a better supervisor I'd be able to handle the situation." When we feel inadequate to handle a situation we will tend to avoid dealing with it.

Fear:

Supervisors are often fearful of getting into discussions about employee problems they tend to view as highly personal. Many are fearful of the loss of control coming from anger. Some may fear criticism in return for some real or imagined failing. Perhaps in some cases the supervisor fears criticism of his own drinking behavior. And behind it all is a fear of, or at least a strong tendency to avoid, unpleasantness.

Ego Involvement:

Another strong psychological factor in some cases is ego involvement

between supervisors and employees. This is usually the case where they have been together for a long time. The supervisor often feels that he has molded his employee in his own image. His employees' successes and failures become his successes and failures. If he caused the success, is it not also possible that he is responsible in some unexplained way for the failures? One is reminded of the plaintive wail of the anguished parent over the wayward child, "How can you do this to me?" Again, in the "Dryden File," Matt, in a conversation with his boss, assumes great responsibility for the person Tom Dryden has become. As we are often blind to the faults of our children, we are equally blind toward employees where the strong tie of ego-involvement exists.

Denial:

One of the most striking similarities between what supervisors experience as they attempt to cope with alcoholic employees and the course of progressive alcoholism is the manifestation of denial. The "blocked awareness" stage described by Trice and Roman is clearly a form of denial and is analogous to the type of denial found in the families of alcoholics. We have all heard supervisors describe employees they know to be alcoholic. They stoutly maintain that job performance is still acceptable. On close questioning supervisors can usually see that there are clear examples of deteriorating job performance which are blocked from recognition.

Even after supervisors can, at an objective and intellectual level, no longer block out the deviant behavior of their employees, they often continue to engage in denial. They may refuse to "see" blatant types of deviant behavior. This will frequently occur after they have made a

threat they are not prepared to carry out. To "see" it would require them to act in a way they envision as impossible. Frequently supervisors talk about an employee whose "job performance is a problem but he's the best employee I've got when he's straight." They accentuate the positive, but by now they can't quite eliminate the negative in their own minds. Feelings of ambivalence are very intense and serve to block constructive action by giving the supervisor a rationale for procrastination.

Supervisors have great difficulty seeing themselves as part of the problem -- another form of denial. If they are tolerating an employee with deteriorating job performance or if they are engaged in the unproductive, "See-Saw" phase they themselves have a problem, managerial in nature. Or at a minimum, they have become part of the problem rather than remaining detached and more objective about it.

This is particularly clear in "The Dryden File" when the counselor asks Matt, "Did it ever occur to you that you are part of the problem?" Matt, of course, denies it and describes his efforts to handle Tom Dryden. The counselor then makes one of the most telling points in the film by pointing out that as long as Matt tries to "handle" Tom Dryden, Dryden will remain convinced that he can handle his supervisor. And he will.

Other Barriers to Action:

There are other bars to effective supervisory action -- long-felt prejudices or fears generated by the management system itself. Supervisors sometimes do not act for fear of a discrimination complaint, justified or not. In cases where these fears are groundless, adequate documentation generally insures that a complaint will not be pursued.

Or, even if pursued, there is little likelihood it will be upheld. Still, such a possibility may generate a very real fear for the supervisor, and must be recognized and dealt with by counselors.

Union action in the form of a grievance which may eventually lead to arbitration is often cited as a bar to supervisory action. Trice's research on the implementation of the Federal program, however, indicates that union awareness and involvement in the alcoholism program increases the likelihood of supervisory action. Where union and management have a clear understanding, supervisors have little to fear and the indication is that they are beginning to understand this.

The system is sometimes identified as a barrier -- that tangled web of regulations and rules that govern our work lives. How many times have we heard supervisors say, or imply, "What difference does it make? You can't fire a Federal employee anyway?" Granted the process is involved, with it's system of checks to insure that rights of employees to due process are not violated. It is not impossible, however, to remove an employee.

The appropriate response here, however, should take the position that removal is very unlikely if timely referral by the supervisor is made. Most employees will accept counseling as an alternative to discipline. Of those who do, 65 to 80% will get well. That's the experience of the Federal program over the past four years.

In those cases where employees refuse counseling or are not successful in their rehabilitative efforts, if performance continues to be a problem, it is a supervisory obligation to take appropriate disciplinary

action -- even up to removal. This is not the outcome we seek but it does resolve a management problem. If supervisors do not live up to their administrative responsibilities then they themselves are problems. They need training and counseling to recognize this.

Supervisors attempting to take appropriate disciplinary action need support and encouragement. Frequently they are punished (in their view) by "nit-picking" as they wend their way through the disciplinary process. Eventually supervisors may see only two alternatives, a choice between being viewed (and viewing themselves) as ineffective because they take no action, or continuing to "fight the system" and taking positive assertive action. Placed in this difficult box many supervisors view the former alternative as less painful.

These are some of the feelings, barriers, and misconceptions that plague even the best of supervisors. Those of us in occupational alcoholism programming need to recognize these realities and be prepared to help supervisors recognize and deal with them.

Training is Not Enough

Much store is placed in supervisory training as an essential ingredient in occupational alcoholism programs. We teach supervisors to identify, confront, motivate and refer employees with alcohol or other problems. The assumption is that, once trained, supervisors will do their job when the need arises. But large numbers of supervisors do not. Our reaction, usually, is to question the effectiveness of the training experience. And we should, of course, examine the training program on a continuing basis.

We suggest, however, that training is not enough. Many supervisors need to be counseled as troubled employees themselves before they will be ready to fulfill their role. They need to get in touch with their feelings, own them, and recognize them as legitimate. This self-understanding serves to defuse the anger, relieve the feelings of inadequacy, and strengthen the supervisor's resolve to take constructive action. Then supervisors are ready to listen to what to do and to learn more about how to do it. We must lead them to the conclusion that good supervisors will act decisively and we must teach them the new skills they will need to use in taking appropriate action.

As has been suggested throughout, the type of counseling for supervisors troubled by having to deal with alcoholic employees can be usefully structured around the parallel nature of the problems and feelings of both the alcoholic and the supervisor. The supervisor must be made to understand how the alcoholic suffers from guilt, anger, fear, denial, and the like. He must further be shown how these same underlying psychological mechanisms are reflected in his own feelings and in the ways they affect his own behavior.

Regarding supervisory training two suggestions may be helpful. First, it may be useful to explore with supervisors the range of feelings and barriers that will probably plague them when they have troubled employees. Perhaps this can best be done by allowing the supervisors to brainstorm how they have actually felt in the past when they have had such problems or how they think they would feel. The goal here is to reassure supervisors that these feelings they will be having are not unique or

abnormal and they, as well as the employee will need counseling help. Second, during training supervisors should be encouraged to establish contact with the counselor prior to referring the problem employee. Their chances for a successful resolution will be greatly enhanced if they have been counseled first.

Who Provides Counseling to the Supervisor:

Supervisors may turn to a variety of people for advice and counsel initially. Often it is the personnel office, particularly when the supervisor is contemplating disciplinary action. Hence, personnelists are in a position to be helpful (therapeutic). The helpful personnelist will recognize that the quoting of rules and regulations as an initial response may serve only to burden the supervisor further with feelings of inadequacy and guilt. Personnelists who have been trained in communication skills will recognize the need to allow the supervisor to ventilate his feelings of anger and frustration, own them, and recognize their legitimacy before gently suggesting an exploration of constructive alternatives.

If personnelists do not feel comfortable in this role they should either seek training to gain these skills or should avoid the role. Remember that the initial contact has the potential for hurting, as well as for helping, the supervisor. If you're not convinced you can help him, at least avoid hurting him (adding to his feelings of inadequacy and guilt).

In work settings where occupational alcoholism programs are functioning, it is highly appropriate for personnelists to refer supervisors to the motivational interviewer or in-house counselor. The counselor's first

job then is to counsel the supervisor and promote the therapeutic exchange mentioned above. If the counselor is skilled in the initial counseling and problem definition phase with alcoholics, he needs no additional training to counsel supervisors. However, as discussed above, counselors need to recognize that they can apply the same counseling skills and techniques in working with supervisors.

In some occupational alcoholism programs, no in-house counseling is provided. The coordinator directing the program refers alcoholic employees to an appropriate outside resource for initial counseling and problem definition or diagnosis. Usually supervisors will make their initial contact with the coordinator. It becomes the coordinator's responsibility to counsel the supervisor or to insure that he is counseled by the outside resource. Coordinators must examine their ability to provide this initial counseling to supervisors. A useful rule in this situation is; if the coordinator feels uncomfortable and inadequate in counseling alcoholics he will probably be ineffective in counseling supervisors. Training in communication skills can help correct this deficiency. As an alternative, coordinators may refer supervisors to the outside resource for their initial counseling.

In summary we would emphasize the importance of the initial response to supervisory needs. It can be a "turn on" to objective, constructive action, or a "turn off" promoting further indecision and delay in dealing with alcoholic employees.

Counseling to Allay Re-Entry Shock

The concepts discussed above are focused primarily on the familiar

situation in which the supervisor is being forced into a position of having to do something about an employee whose drinking problem is impacting his job performance. There is, of course, another stage in which the supervisor will also need counseling and assistance. This is the phase during which the employee is coming back to work. There is a period of "re-entry shock" in which supervisor behavior can markedly affect the probability of a successful readjustment by the employee. The employee will probably not be completely back to his optimum performance capability, and will be filled with doubts and anxieties concerning his ability to work effectively and remain sober. He may have strong guilt feelings and his embarrassment vis-a-vis his peers may cause him to show aggression and overt anger.

The supervisor must be made to expect these things and be prepared to deal with them. Again, the occupational alcoholism counselor can ease the supervisor's concerns and suggest specific actions which may be taken to foster the returning employee's adjustment. Of particular importance here is the delivery of substantial amounts of positive reinforcement for those new behaviors of the employee which the supervisor wants to maintain, e.g., promptness, sobriety, attendance at aftercare and AA sessions, improving work performance and the like.

Consequently an active relationship between the counselor and the supervisor should be maintained after the re-entry so that any developing problems can be dealt with in time to avoid a relapse on the part of the employee.

Summary

Most supervisors want to be good supervisors. They also want to help their employees resolve their problems. However, supervisors develop a range of strong feelings similar in nature to those of alcoholic people and their spouses. These strong feelings prevent supervisors from dealing with alcoholic employees in objective, constructive ways. To overcome these barriers supervisors require specialized counseling.

A conceptual scheme is suggested for counseling such supervisors. The proposed framework takes advantage of the parallel "syndrome" of feelings and behaviors. This concept utilizes the ready availability of the required skills in the population of alcoholism counselors. It suggests that those to whom supervisors may turn initially, in a quest for a solution to their dilemma, need to examine their ability to provide this counseling. This approach has a high degree of "face-validity" for both counselors and supervisors and provides suggestions for re-assessing current approaches to supervisory training.